Azza Basarudin

4/1/2016

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CTM: So we're delighted to have Azza Basarudin with us today. Today is April 1st, 2016. April Fool's Day.

LEC: But we are not fools.

CTM: But we are no fools. So, we are really delighted to have you here.

AB: Very happy to be here. Thank you for making me a part of this project. Very honored!

CTM: Yes, yes, we are excited.

LEC: We just said, we have to seize the opportunity.

CTM: You were here, so…

LEC: So, as we were telling you, this is a project that we put together about…that we're calling Feminist Freedom Warriors and it's because we recognize that the kinds of work that we've all done, deserves to be recorded for this archive that we're trying to put together. So, it's mostly your story. So we want to start by asking you to tell us what brought you feminist work, feminist activist work, the kind of scholarship you produce and so on.

AB: I want to start with how I grew up. I want to start with my roots, my family. I was born and raised in Malaysia in a middle class Muslim family. My parents' Islam was—the kind of Islam that they taught us was that it was a blueprint for how you live your life. It wasn't necessarily about rituals or adhering to certain kinds of ideologies or anything like that. It was just, this is what your religion is, take what you want from it and do whatever you will with it, right, so that's the kind of family I grew up in. And I grew up with very, very strong and vocal women. My grandmothers, my aunts, my cousins and even my dad. So I think you know, my idea of feminism…I wasn't even introduced to the word feminism until

sometime when I was like in high school. But when I came to the idea, to understand okay what feminism is, the only way that I could think about it at that time—this was in my late teens—was of my father, my parents. They're concerned for education, they're concerned for safety, the safety of women's bodies, of my body. The way in which my grandmother would hold her ground in any kinds of argument and the way in which they were matriarchs of the family. They handled financial responsibility, they handled a lot of things in the family, right. So for me, that was the kind of feminism that I never had a name for at that point. So when my friends were talking about feminism as a teenager, what they would ask me, was your mom a feminist? I don't think my mother would subscribe to that label, or my grandmother. Not because people understand feminism as a western concept, right, and the fact that it is organic is something a lot of people are still struggling with, but just that I don't think they need any kind of labeling for who they are in that sense. And I think that has you know sort of forged a path for me to think about feminism in that way. It's about accountability, it's about responsibility and it's about thinking through solidarity in various ways—in that sense, so—

CTM: So besides this personal genealogy within your family and community, if you were to be asked, what were moments that sort of brought you to a very politicized consciousness of feminist or radical praxis?

AB: I think that came with coming to graduate school in the US. In Malaysia I am a Malay and I am a Muslim and I am a part of the majority Malaysia. So politically, I would say I was apolitical for a long time, right and that comes with being part of a majority. I wouldn't say I didn't have political consciousness but it wasn't the same kind of consciousness that was shaped when I came to the US. So I became a woman of color and you know I started reading feminist works by women of color. I read your work, Audre Lorde, June Jordon, Bell Hooks and it opened up a different kind of understanding of how to be political in ways that not only that I had to confront when I came to this country but also in terms of the ways in which I was thinking of myself as a political agent. I sort of felt a connection, I felt a grounding in terms of affinity with other marginalized groups, other people of color. I think I fully came to political consciousness when I was doing my masters in Chicago. I was doing my masters in women's studies and that's when I was starting to read all these kinds of works and that—I would say—that was a pivotal moment in my life.

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CTM: And then how did you go on to do the kind of intellectual work?

AB: You know, I always say that I came to do research on Malaysia by way of Egypt. I was always interested in Arab women's movements, particularly Egyptian women's movements because they have a long history of anti-colonial struggle. Malaysia was

also a former British colony. I've always been interested in colonialism, post-colonialism, things of that matter. So I started researching Egypt. I worked on Egypt and then while I was there I stumbled upon…I was doing work with The Women and Memory Forum, a group that re-reads Arab and Islamic folk tales from a feminist perspective. These are academics and they also perform the folk tales that they re-write. And so they have reproduced this work from the 1890s of this Muslim woman who was advocating for re-interpretation of the Quran. So this was in the 1890s, she was talking about how women need to read the Quran for themselves. And I'd never really thought about Islam in that sense, that it's open to interpretation. So that was my sort of first exposure—this was the first year of grad school—to that idea, to that notion of okay there is possibility, there's a lot of possibility in returning or looking at the religious texts from a feminist lens. So that interest then took me back to Malaysia when I found out about the work of Sisters in Islam. It got me more interested in the gender issues and then 9/11 happened. I felt like it was more of a moral responsibility to actually delve into this work, right. The kind of rhetorics that were spewing out about Muslim women, that you know, they're oppressed, they're walking five feet behind their husbands, they have no agency or they're predisposed to violence, right, so there's a very limited narrative as to what Muslim women are, what they look like. You know the kind of imaginaries that were dominant at that time. And these are not the Muslim women that I know, not the people that I grew up with, the strong women that I knew. So that brought me into the kind of work that I'm doing now. So I wanted to look at the ways in which women are reclaiming the religious tradition for themselves, you know, in part as pushing back against the kind of orientalist imaginings of Muslim women, but also in terms of trying to reclaim the religious authority for women. So, positioning themselves as a source of Islamic authority. And you know, for those of us who are very invested in the Islamic tradition, men have always had the sole authority to interpret the tradition and women's voices have always been marginalized. And this is the kind of work that I think is important not only for Muslim communities themselves, but also because of the kinds of rhetoric we've been hearing particularly now with the presidential election. The kinds of, you know, vilification that's happening with Muslims; the kinds of dehumanization, the violence that's being inflicted on Muslim bodies; this is the kind of work that's even more important to bring to the fore.

LEC: What do you see happening in those communities—any of them that you know or are closely familiar with in LA or any place else, in Muslim communities?

AB: So when I was…okay so grad school, then 9/11 and then I've seen the kinds of hateful acts towards you know, identifiable Muslims who bear visible markers of being Muslim, like the hijab, one of them. And I've seen a lot of that after 9/11. That happened to people I know, people I love. My sister was spat on. She wore the hijab at that point. I was walking down the street with her, somebody spat on her and called her a terrorist.

That was the experience of a lot of Muslims after 9/11. What I've noticed is—after ten years of, no more than ten years on, it's 2016—with what happened in San Bernardino, you know the mass killings in San Bernardino, has brought on a fresh new wave of Islamophobia. And whereas after 9/11 you know, the FBI, CIA, state surveillance have increased in terms of policing Muslim communities, putting informants into the community, the ways in which the community is being policed now is through this initiative called Centering Violence Extremism. Right and this is an initiative of the Department of Homeland Security and what this initiative is trying to do is actually to educate Muslims to police themselves, right. They're calling it community partnership, right and they're saying the difference between the ways in which we are engaging, you know, the ways in which we have to secure America and secure our communities is radically different from what has happened after 9/11.

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We're not infiltrating your communities, we're not surveilling your communities, we're not putting informants, we're not doing that anymore. What we want to do is partnership with the communities. We want you to tell us how to keep you safe. And a big part of the CVE program is you know, mobilizing women as intimate partners in their role as wives, spouse, mothers in the community to detect radical behavior. So women are supposedly, given their biological determinism, you know nurture and all these things, that they're able to detect any hint of radicalization.

CTM: Among their kids.

AB: Among their kids and the youth in their community. We've got to look at the fact that radicalization doesn't mean anything, right. But what's even I think more troubling is that the ways in which this has been marketed as an empowerment for Muslim women, as civic participation, as your duty as a patriotic American. This is how it's been marketed. And so I attended a conference. There is this organization of Muslim women in Southern California. it's very much interested in working with law enforcement on this initiative. So they had a conference that's called Muslim Women's Empowerment Conference. So when I hear about it, my colleague and I were working on this project, went and it was like a 4th of July celebration. There were American flags everywhere. There was a CIA booth, a FBI booth everywhere and this was a Muslim women's empowerment conference. All the speakers were people from Homeland Security, the FBI, the CIA, LAPD. So this is very much about how do you become the correct type of American, right? The acceptable American that is not a threat to the nation…

CTM: You know what this is? Neoliberalization of COINTELPRO.

LEC: And you know what's been part of it? When that happens, there are colleagues and friends in other places of mine who were at that conference. You know what part

of that is? There is a feminist component in this country—white feminist component—that's working with them about—the notion of the name came from women are the ones mostly oppressed in Muslim community and this is for their liberation so reach out to those who are conscious already. Very devious.

CTM: Well, it's similar isn't it to "We're going to Afghanistan in order to democratize and liberate women"? It's really similar.

AB: Exactly, it's very similar. And it's also the targeting of a specific kind of Muslim, right, it's not necessarily, you know, the kind of visible Muslim that you see. These women are a part of, they're mostly of South Asian descent, upper class women in Orange County, Pakistani, mostly, who don't wear the hijab, don't have any visible…so they're not a threat in that sense, right? So there's that, which is, you know, something that my colleague and I are working on as a new project that is deeply troubling and the way in which it's being promoted as the part to empowerment and the part to feminism. But they're also very real issues within the community, in which Muslim women are struggling to find a leadership role. I mean when you go into the mosque or unto community engagement there are limited roles for women, not because women are not you know, speaking up for themselves but if they go to a committee meeting in a mosque they're told to go wash some dishes. They can't be at the table to be a part of the decision making process. So what my colleague and I are discovering in the course of my research is this is part of the problem. It's not merely, you know, this overwhelming desire to work with law enforcement and to secure some sort of a leadership role or empowerment process. But it's also because of the lack of spaces that are available within our own communities that are not being addressed. So this is a part of the problem as well.

LEC: They do it in all communities. They do something similar in the Black African American community on the east coast around crime.

CTM: Yeah, the community partnership stuff which is…

LEC: Tell on them because you're more progressive.

AB: Exactly. And it's creating schisms very particularly in African-American Muslims. So who's being targeted now as state partners in terms of managing violent extremism are a particular kind of Muslim.

CTM: Right.

LEC: Their construction of the model minority citizen.

CTM: Right. So this is really important, this current work that you're doing, sort of demystifying all of these forms of governance actually and violence that is being done in order to create certain kinds of citizens and non-citizens, right, good

Muslim/bad Muslim, all of these things. How do you see then in that context the impact of your work, both in larger scale but also within feminist communities? I'm kind of curious about what conversations are happening among feminists around these issues as well.

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AB: I think a lot of the conversations right now…because Los Angeles, Minneapolis and Boston were chosen for the pilot cities for the project right, so they're still in the course—The thing about this Countering Violence Extremism project is nobody really knows what it's about. If you ask a lot of people, they're still in the dark as to what it looks like, what are the actual programs, the funding coming down and who's being selected to implement these programs, so it's kind of really vague right now. And it's been in place for almost two years. The Muslim communities, the non-profits in Southern California are trying to work out, you know, the kinks in the…trying to figure out who's doing what, what is it about? But there isn't really a lot of feminist conversation around it. In fact, when my colleague and I presented our paper a couple of months ago at a conference in Berkeley, an Islamophobia conference, nobody's ever heard of this group, nobody has ever heard of this kind of force so they're very interested to find out what we're trying to say but at the same time they are also I would say, pushing back a little bit in terms of trying to link the analysis of patriarchy within the communities to the kinds of empowerment projects that women are participating in, so you know, there's always resistance—

CTM: So, Imperial Feminism 101.

[Laughter]

CTM: No?

LEC: Exactly.

AB: It's the same idea that we've heard over and over again, right, when a community is under attack women's issues take a back seat. So, our communities are under attack. Why are we focusing on this? Well, this is a larger part of why the community is being policed and this is not being addressed. We're not going to be pushed in the back again. We are going to confront this head on. If women are being targeted in their role as women, as mothers to drive the CVE programming, this needs to be on the table. It needs to be a part of the Islamophobia conference. It needs to be a part of any kind of organizing around the issue.

LEC: And they need to recognize if they don't do that they are inadvertently being complicit in the program.

AB: What we've discovered is that the young women at the conference were really happy to see us there, see us talking about this. They actually said that we don't have any role models. People don't really talk this way. Not in terms of feminist analysis. That's what they're not hearing within their circle. The integration of what's happening with the communities, the Islamophobia, the policing, with feminist analysis. And my colleague and I find that okay this is something that we need to think more about in terms of activism. What are the kinds of models of leadership that women are seeing and not seeing? How can we play a role? What can we do within this context? So in this sense we are committed to driving the feminist discourse on this. We want this on the table. And we're working towards that.

LEC: I wanted to know what are some of the challenges that you see facing you in this kind of work? Not you individually, personally, but collectively. This is a project that you all are mounting. Or some of the challenges you can envision beyond, you know, what you had mentioned earlier. I think some of the challenges for us is actually making the community realize that the kind of scrutiny, the kind of de-humanization and violence that they're experiencing in this way, after the San Bernardino attack, is that in terms of organizing the energy needs to be refocused on thinking about the connections between other communities and the struggles of other communities. Right, the way it's playing out now is, "Oh! Muslims are under attack", you know, Islamophobia, but it is a very distinct discourse separated from the kinds of struggles that have taken place in this country and other communities. We have the internment of the Japanese Americans, we have issues of slavery, civil rights. These are not being taken into account. And the connections are not being made, at least, a forceful a visible connection. This is connected to state violence, institutionalized racism and de-humanization, right and so I feel like—

LEC: Which has a long history.

AB: Which has a long history in this country. And many forms that are happening right now, while there is a certain form of Islamophobia, policing of Muslims similar things are happening, criminalization, etc. of Black and brown people for various other histories.

AB: It's true. We feel—my colleague and I—we have to get people to realize that these connections have to be made visible. The connections have to be addressed. In this way it is connected to a larger structure.

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It's not an isolated incident of Islamophobia. It didn't just come out of nowhere, that why are they doing this to us? This is not why they're doing this to us. This is a part of the system, the structure. So I think that the challenge for us is trying to bring that

analysis to the fore, trying to refocus the energy around organizing around that and mobilizing with various communities.

LEC: What are the sites of resistance that you see to that? I'm sure there are some.

AB: As with any kind of coalitional work there's always, know, some kind of negotiation going on but I think first and foremost, maybe a lot of people who are doing active organizing within the community, are afraid of taking the attention away from what is happening within the community. By connecting it to other struggles, they're afraid it might dilute what is going on right now. But I also think that some of that is connected to the kinds of racism that happen within communities of color. The kind of thinking that says, "Well, they've had their issues because they're Black" or "these are the Mexican problems", this is somehow "yes, it might have a connection to us but it's not really…". So you know, I think it's also, the model minority—it goes back to model minority discourse, right, who can be a good American—I think a lot of American Muslims are sort of stuck within that paradigm. Not all but for the most part. For the organizing we have radical groups in New York. I would say that New York organizing are more radical than LA, for example. So, I think that it also depends on where you are.

CTM: Right, and what consciousness and intersectionality there is within the struggles that are happening on the ground in those cities. So New York, there is more visibility and people are making certain kinds of connections.

AB: In LA, not so much I would say, you know, people I think, the organizing in LA is very dispersed and the kinds of people that are mobilizing around the CVE are non-profits. You see the same people speaking over and over again. They're mostly men. They belong to either the Council of Islamic Relations or the Muslim Public Affairs Council. It's…not a radical approach to activism, organizing. It's very much, let's work with the government, let's work with the state and see what we can do, which I can understand and appreciate. I mean, that is one way in which we have to address the issue, right but I also think there has to be a critique on the state as to the kinds of structures that have been present, the kind of de-humanization that we have seen over and over and over again that can't be separated from any kinds of negotiations that take place.

CTM: Okay, so shifting a little bit. What do you see as the best way for feminists, specifically feminists to work across different forms of divides and borders and to create solidarities around what you see as some of the most urgent issues facing us right now? Because I think that even though there is a lot of continuity of issues, right and you can always go back and trace forms of colonialism of different kinds within these, there is a particular moment that we're living. What would be your sense of how we could create some of these communities and solidarities?

LEC: Kind of like you were mentioning just now. You see those divisions, you see the resistances. What do you think needs to happen?

CTM: Yeah.

AB: I think people need to be willing to, as cliché as it sounds, to come up halfway.

CTM: Whatever communities of women of color that you've worked with where you've been able to mobilize or organize across national, ethnic, racial, sexual divides—when has it worked? Like is there an instance that you can think of where it's really worked?

AB: In terms of transnational solidarity.

LEC: And you probably will see comparisons as relevant with Bersih. You may, because these divides are what…so we have in some cases similar agendas but there is a history of division for other reasons that prevents us from working together.

AB: I think people are sometimes stuck in terms of terminology, still**:** What is democracy? What does it look like? What is feminism? Well, I'm not really a feminist. I don't subscribe to that. You can say feminism is organic but I'm really not on board on that. I don't need to be labeled. I don't need any label. Right? So I think half the time in terms of coalitional work across different…that often comes up and people get stuck in that.

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I mean sure you can move on but it's always some sort of a residue of being stuck in terms of labeling. I think, you know, sometimes that gets in the way of actual productive work but it's also sometimes I feel like people are out for themselves, in a sense. The holier-than-thou activists attitude that gets in the actual way of work being done. And that still is a big problem, you know, in terms of sometimes when I was doing fieldwork I'm looking at all these different women's organizations and how they work across different…but a lot of times is also the one person that would become visible—and this is the person that would carry through—and so there's a lot of resentment you know in terms of organizing in that way, right? Who gets to be the visible face of a movement? And who are the drivers? Who are the people doing the work behind the scene? And it's very real and it's not sophisticated so we don't want to talk about it…because it's not sexy. It is not sexy but those are the kind of struggles that take place. Class-based struggles, right, educational differences, and these are all a part of organizing I think. If I'm thinking about that then these are the kind of stuff that comes to mind.

LEC: Yeah, and they're very real and they're major obstacles. Like the examples you point to are common throughout social movements. We saw it in The General Body here at SU, we have seen it in Black Lives Matter.

CTM: Yeah, there's a lot of…so if you were to envision what you are working for in terms of a vision of justice for women in Malaysia, in US, wherever…

LEC: Noting all the differences.

CTM: Yeah, and the divisions, what is it that you're working for?

AB: Hope. I think, of course, justice is a part of hope, right, but I think that hope is something that can drive…is a word, is a concept, an idea that can bind people, you know sometimes in a more concrete way than justice can because people have different ideas about what justice is. An inequality for someone isn't for somebody else. But I think people can actually relate to what hope is. I mean, Obama ran on the idea of hope. I feel like we need that especially with what's happening right now with the presidential race, the debates and all this kind of stuff. I just feel like unless people have hope that change can happen, transformation is possible then something can happen.

CTM: There is a level of affect that's connected to hope, that sometimes is not connected to justice and the way people understand it.

LEC: That's very true, especially for poor people.

CTM: Right? Because justice is a little bit more abstract as a construct than hope is. So—.

LEC: Hope is real and people can relate to it in their individual way and their larger political way. Like you know you go in poor communities, you ask people what do you hope for? What do you think about hope? They have real answers.

CTM: And you know, what to me is hopeful is people like you, doing this kind of work, you know, down the generations.

AB: But it's people like you who have paved the way. Have shone light on how the ways in which to do it and to do it in a feminist way. That's what's important.

CTM: But it has to be taken up…so we could do…

LEC: It can't be left.

CTM: We could all be doing really important work but it needs to be taken up.

LEC: We are all doing.

CTM: And we are.

LEC: We are all doing that important work. The real hope for me is understanding and imagining and seeing how it can continue, which I tell my students everyday, that you are the generation that we're looking forward to continue this.

CTM: Yeah. And our daughters.

AB: And you know, connected to that is I don't often think about women's leadership as being a part of this. I always think of that as a part of gender mainstreaming. It's some that I really don't want to pay attention to and I'm not interested in. I'm honestly not interested in it. But going into the communities when we present our work on the CVE, for example, we meet so many young women who are starving for some sort of mentorship, not even just leadership, mentorship in terms of having a model of how do we go about this issue.

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We are feminists but how do we talk about feminism with people in our community? We are Muslims but we are also feminists and we want to think about issues in a feminist way but we have no guideline as to how to do this. Lately, for me that has also been at the back of my mind. You know, this is something that I really need to look into more, to spend my energy on.

LEC: Because for those young women, you may not see…have any interest in notions of power and all the other attachments to leadership, but for them you are a leader and so they look to women like yourself and say, you know, if they can attach themselves to that, that movement that they see that person having a significant role in, it's a model for them.

CTM: It's what it means to turn forty-two. Seriously, it does! You know ,because you then begin to see that there are generations beyond and that one of the responsibilities is this. Is how to live a life that in fact can provide hope, can make it possible to reimagine their own lives in certain ways. Not to be necessarily didactic about it, or be a leader about it or a celebrity about it, which is how it's framed in this kind of world we live in, in a very consumerist…

LEC: In a neoliberal culture where everything can be bought, sold and appropriated if necessary.

CTM: And it's all individualized. So I always think that the part of being an individual that counts is to actually think of living a self-reflective, examined life that is a visible form of pedagogy of some kind.

LEC: And what really is beyond the self? How much struggle in thinking forward and forward thinking is about collective action? That's what social movements come out of, not individual leadership.

CTM: On which note, thank you so much, Azza.

AB: Thank you for having me.

CTM: This was really wonderful.

LEC: Thank you.

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Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.